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ABSTRACT

Judges have interpreted the First Amendment as forbidding the establishment of religion by the state and guaranteeing free exercise of individual religious liberty. The two clauses require public school officials to adopt a position of neutrality with regard to religion in the school setting. Educators must walk a fine line, accommodating religious beliefs while avoiding any appearance of sponsoring religious indoctrination. To help school officials meet the judicial directive for official neutrality and thus avoid legal problems, this publication provides an overview of recent court decisions involving religion in public schools. It first discusses court decisions related to avoiding violations of the Establishment Clause, including school policies requiring prayer and Bible reading, state law authorizing school prayer, student-initiated voluntary prayers at graduation ceremonies, teachers' activities advancing or coercing religious practice, private religious programs on school grounds, allowing employees and other persons to proselytize in school, religious displays and symbols, curricula "promoting" witchcraft, recognition of religious holidays, and religious choral music. The next section discusses decisions related to the accommodation of free exercise, such as the distribution of religious materials, curricular content, student dress and appearance, and religious clubs and groups. The summary highlights court rulings pertaining to religious neutrality. (Contains 71 endnotes). (LMI)

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